

BIBLE READING BY THE LAITY, RESTRICTIONS ON.

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I. The Ancient Church:

It is indisputable that in Apostolic times the Old Testament was commonly read (John v, 47; Acts viii, 28; xvii, 11; II Tim. iii, 15). Roman Catholics admit that this reading was not restricted in the first centuries, in spite of its abuse by Gnostics and other heretics. On the contrary, the reading of Scripture was urged (Justin Martyr, xlv, *ANF*, i, 177-178; Jerome, *Adv. libros Rufini*, i, 9, *NPNF*, 2d ser., iii, 487); and Pamphilus, the friend of Eusebius, kept copies of Scripture to furnish to those who desired them. Chrysostom attached considerable importance to the reading of Scripture on the part of the laity and denounced the error that it was to be permitted only to monks and priests (*De Lazaro concio*, iii, *MPG*, xlviii, 992; *Hom. ii in Matt.*, *MPG*, lvii, 30, *NPNF*, 2d ser., x, 13). He insisted upon access being given to the entire Bible, or at least to the New Testament (*Hom. ix in Col.*, *MPG*, lxii, 361, *NPNF*, xiii, 301). The women also, who were always at home, were diligently to read the Bible (*Hom. xxxv on Gen. xii*, *MPG*, liii, 323). Jerome recommended the reading and studying of Scripture on the part of the women (*Epist.*, cxxviii, 3, *MPL*, xxii, 1098, *NPNF*, 2d ser., vi, 259; *Epist.*, lxxix, 9, *MPG*, xxii, 730-731, *NPNF*, 2d ser., vi, 167). The translations of the Bible, Augustine considered a blessed means of propagating the Word of God among the nations (*De doct. christ.*, ii, 5, *NPNF*, 1st ser., ii, 536); Gregory I recommended the reading of the Bible without placing any limitations on it (*Hom. iii in Ezek.*, *MPL*, lxxvi, 968).

II. The Middle Ages:

Owing to lack of culture among the Germanic and Romanic peoples, there was for a long time no thought of restricting access to the Bible there. Translations of Biblical books into German began only in the Carolingian period and were not originally intended for the laity. Nevertheless the people were anxious to have the divine service and the Scripture lessons read in the vernacular. John VIII in 880 permitted, after the reading of the Latin gospel, a translation into Slavonic; but Gregory VII, in a letter to Duke Vratislav of Bohemia in 1080 characterized the custom as unwise, bold, and forbidden (*Epist.*, vii, 11; P. Jaffé, *BRG*, ii, 392 sqq.). This was a formal prohibition, not of Bible reading in general, but of divine service in the vernacular.

With the appearance, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, of the Albigenses and Waldenses, who appealed to the Bible in all their disputes with the Church, the hierarchy was furnished with a reason for shutting up the Word of God. The Synod of Toulouse in 1229 forbade the laity to have in their possession any copy of the books of the Old and the New Testament except the Psalter and such other portions as are contained in the Breviary or the Hours of the Blessed Mary. "We most strictly forbid these works in the vulgar tongue" (Harduin, *Concilia*, xii, 178; Mansi, *Concilia*, xxiii, 194). The Synod of Tarragona (1234) ordered all vernacular versions to be brought to the bishop to be burned. James I renewed this decision of the Tarragona synod in 1276. The synod held there in 1317 under Archbishop Ximenes prohibited to Beghards, Beguines, and tertiaries of the Franciscans the possession of theological books in the vernacular (Mansi, *Concilia*, xxv, 627). The order of James I was renewed by later kings and confirmed by Paul II (1464-71). Ferdinand and Isabella (1474-1516) prohibited the translation of the Bible into the vernacular or the possession of such translations (F. H. Reusch, *Index der verbotenen*

Böcher, i, Bonn, 1883, 44).

In England Wyclif's Bible-translation caused the resolution passed by the third Synod of Oxford (1408): "No one shall henceforth of his own authority translate any text of Scripture into English; and no part of any such book or treatise composed in the time of John Wycliffe or later shall be read in public or private, under pain of excommunication" (Hefele, *Conciliengeschichte*, vi, 984). But Sir Thomas More states that he had himself seen old Bibles which were examined by the bishop and left in the hands of good Catholic laymen (Blunt, *Reformation of the Church of England*, 4th ed., London, 1878, i, 505). In Germany, Charles IV issued in 1369 an edict to four inquisitors against the translating and the reading of Scripture in the German language. This edict was caused by the operations of Beghards and Beguines. In 1485 and 1486, Berthold, archbishop of Mainz, issued an edict against the printing of religious books in German, giving among other reasons the singular one that the German language was unadapted to convey correctly religious ideas, and therefore they would be profaned. Berthold's edict had some influence, but could not prevent the dissemination and publication of new editions of the Bible. Leaders in the Church sometimes recommended to the laity the reading of the Bible, and the Church kept silence officially as long as these efforts were not abused.

III. The Roman Catholic Church since the Reformation:

Luther's translation of the Bible and its propagation could not but influence the Roman Catholic Church. Humanism, through such men as Erasmus, advocated the reading of the Bible and the necessity of making it accessible by translations; but it was felt that Luther's translation must be offset by one prepared in the interest of the Church. Such editions were Emser's of 1527, and the Dietenberg Bible of 1534. The Church of Rome silently tolerated these translations.

1. Action by the Council of Trent.

At last the Council of Trent took the matter in hand, and in its fourth session (Apr. 18, 1546) adopted the *Decretum de editione et usu librorum sacrorum*, which enacted the following: "This synod ordains and decrees that henceforth sacred Scripture, and especially the aforesaid old and vulgate edition, be printed in the most correct manner possible; and that it shall not be lawful for any one to print, or cause to be printed, any books whatever on sacred matters without the name of the author; or in future to sell them, or even to possess them, unless they shall have been first examined and approved of by the ordinary." When the question of the translation of the Bible into the vernacular came up, Bishop Acqui of Piedmont and Cardinal Pacheco advocated its prohibition. This was strongly opposed by Cardinal Madruzzi, who claimed that "not the translations but the professors of Hebrew and Greek are the cause of the confusion in Germany; a prohibition would produce the worst impression in Germany." As no agreement could be had, the council appointed an index-commission to report to the pope, who was to give an authoritative decision.

2. Rules of Various Popes.

The first index published by a pope (Paul IV), in 1559, prohibited under the title of *Biblia prohibita* a number of Latin editions as well as the publication and possession of translations of the Bible in German, French, Spanish, Italian, English, or Dutch, without the permission of the sacred office of the Roman Inquisition (Reusch, *ut sup.*, i, 264). In 1584 Pius IV published the index prepared by the commission mentioned above. Herein ten rules are laid down, of which the fourth reads thus: "Inasmuch as it is manifest from experience that if the Holy Bible, translated into the vulgar tongue, be indiscriminately allowed to every one, the rashness of men will cause more evil than good to arise from it, it is, on this point, referred to the judgment of the bishops or inquisitors, who may, by the advice of the priest or confessor, permit the reading of the Bible translated into the vulgar tongue by Catholic authors, to those persons whose faith and piety they apprehend will be augmented and not injured by it; and this permission must be had in writing. But if any shall have the presumption to read or possess it without such permission, he shall not receive absolution until he have first delivered up such Bible to the ordinary." Regulations for booksellers follow, and then: "Regulars shall neither read nor purchase such Bibles without special license from their superiors." Sixtus V substituted in 1590 twenty-two new rules

for the ten of Pius IV. Clement VIII abolished in 1596 the rules of Sixtus, but added a "remark" to the fourth rule given above, which particularly restores the enactment of Paul IV. The right of the bishops, which the fourth rule implies, is abolished by the "remark," and the bishop may grant a dispensation only when especially authorized by the pope and the Inquisition (Reusch, ut sup., i, 333). Benedict XIV enlarged, in 1757, the fourth rule thus: "If such Bible-versions in the vernacular are approved by the apostolic see or are edited with annotations derived from the holy fathers of the Church or from learned and Catholic men, they are permitted." This modification of the fourth rule was abolished by Gregory XVI in pursuance of an admonition of the index-congregation, Jan. 7, 1836, "which calls attention to the fact that according to the decree of 1757 only such versions in the vernacular are to be permitted as have been approved by the apostolic see or are edited with annotations," but insistence is placed on all those particulars enjoined by the fourth rule of the index and afterward by Clement VIII (Reusch, ut sup., ii, 852).

3. Rules and Practice in Different Countries.

In England the reading of the Bible was made by Henry VIII (1530) to depend upon the permission of the superiors. Tyndale's version, printed before 1535, was prohibited. In 1534 the Canterbury convocation passed a resolution asking the king to have the Bible translated and to permit its reading. A folio copy of Coverdale's translation was put into every church for the benefit of the faithful, and fastened with a chain. In Spain the Inquisitor-General de Valdes published in 1551 the index of Louvain of 1550, which prohibits "Bibles (New and Old Testaments) in the Spanish or other vernacular" (Reusch, ut sup., i, 133). This prohibition was abolished in 1778. The Lisbon index of 1824 in Portugal prohibited quoting in the vernacular in any book passages from the Bible. In Italy the members of the order of the Jesuits were in 1596 permitted to use a Catholic Italian translation of the Gospel-lessons. In France the Sorbonne declared, Aug. 26, 1525, that a French translation of the Bible or of single books must be regarded as dangerous under conditions then present; extant versions were better suppressed than tolerated. In the following year, 1526, it prohibited the translation of the entire Bible, but permitted the translation of single books with proper annotations. The indexes of the Sorbonne, which by royal edict were binding, after 1544 contained the statement: "How dangerous it is to allow the reading of the Bible in the vernacular to unlearned people and those not piously or humbly disposed (of whom there are many in our times) may be seen from the Waldensians, Albigenses, and Poor Men of Lyons, who have thereby lapsed into error and have led many into the same condition. Considering the nature of men, the translation of the Bible into the vernacular must in the present be regarded therefore as dangerous and pernicious" (Reusch, ut sup., i, 151). The rise of Jansenism in the seventeenth century, and especially the appearance, under its encouragement, of Quesnel's New Testament with moral reflections under each verse (*Le Nouveau Testament en françois avec des reflexions morales sur chaque vers*, Paris, 1699), which was expressly intended to popularize the reading of the Bible, caused the renewal, with increased stringency, of the rules already quoted. The Jesuits prevailed upon Clement XI to publish the famous bull *Unigenitus*, Sept. 8, 1713, in which he condemned seven propositions in Quesnel's work which advocated the reading of the Bible by the laity (cf. H. J. D. Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, Würzburg, 1854, 287). In the Netherlands, Neercassel, bishop of Emmerich, published in 1677 (in Latin) and 1680 (in French) a treatise in which he dealt with the fourth rule of the Tridentine index as obsolete, and urged the diligent reading of the Bible. In Belgium in 1570 the unlicensed sale of the Bible in the vernacular was strictly prohibited; but the use of the Antwerp Bible continued. In Poland the Bible was translated and often published. In Germany papal decrees could not very well be carried out and the reading of the Bible was not only not prohibited, but was approved and praised. Billuart about 1750, as quoted by Van Ess, states, "In France, Germany, and Holland the Bible is read by all without distinction." In the nineteenth century the clergy took great interest in the work of Bible Societies. Thus [Leander van Ess](#) acted as agent of the British and Foreign Bible Society for Catholic Germany, and the society published the New Testament of Van Ess, which was placed on the Index in 1821. The prince-bishop of Breslau, Sedlnitzki, who afterward joined the Evangelical Church, was also interested in circulating the Bible. As the Bible Societies generally circulated the translations of heretics, the popes Leo XII (May 5, 1824); Pius VIII (May 25, 1829); Gregory XVI (Aug. 15, 1840; May 8, 1844); Pius IX (Nov. 9, 1846; Dec. 8, 1849) issued encyclicals against the Bible Societies. In the syllabus of 1864 "socialism, communism,

secret societies, . . . and Bible Societies" are placed in the same category. As to the effect of the papal decrees there is a difference of opinion within the Catholic Church. In theory the admonition of Gregory XVI no doubt exists, but practise often ignores it.

IV. The Greek Church

The Greek church knows of no such restriction of use of the Bible as that of the Roman Church. Nevertheless the Synod of Jerusalem of 1672 answered the first of the four questions: "Whether the Holy Scripture can be read by all Christians," in the negative. Nicholas I of Russia abolished in 1826 the Bible Society founded by Alexander I for the propagation of the Bible in the Russian vernacular.

V. The Evangelical Churches:

Luther strove to open the Bible to all, and his version served that purpose. The principle that every Evangelical Christian is at liberty to read the Bible remained uncontroverted, though Semler (*De antiquo ecclesiæ statu commentatio*, 37, 60, 68) makes the assertion that the sacred writings, especially the apostolic epistles, were not intended for the use of the people and the congregations; that in the ancient Church no universal use of the Bible existed, and that the catechumens especially were prohibited from using the Bible. Bible-compendiums for special purposes and separate circles also came into use in the Evangelical Church. Veit Dietrich published in 1541 his *Summarium* of the Old and the New Testament; Cromwell's soldiers had *The Soldier's Pocket Bible* of 1643 (facsimile edition, *Cromwell's Soldier's Bible*, London, 1895). The restriction upon Bible-reading in the Evangelical Church became of practical importance only in the schools. For didactic purposes Amos Comenius recommended compendiums and special manuals of Scripture, which the scholar was to use till he could read the Gospel in the original. The didactic needs were gradually satisfied by the introduction of text-books of "Biblical history," the Catechism, and collections of Bible sentences. From time to time the question has been agitated whether the whole Bible or so-called school Bibles should be used in the schools. The principal reason adduced in favor of the latter is that certain passages are objectionable because they deal with sexual relations. But these reasons are not well founded, since reading of the Bible has never been a cause of demoralization. The moral earnestness which without veiling calls things by their right names is to be preferred to a careful paraphrasing and veiling of the sense which only the more excite impure desires.

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